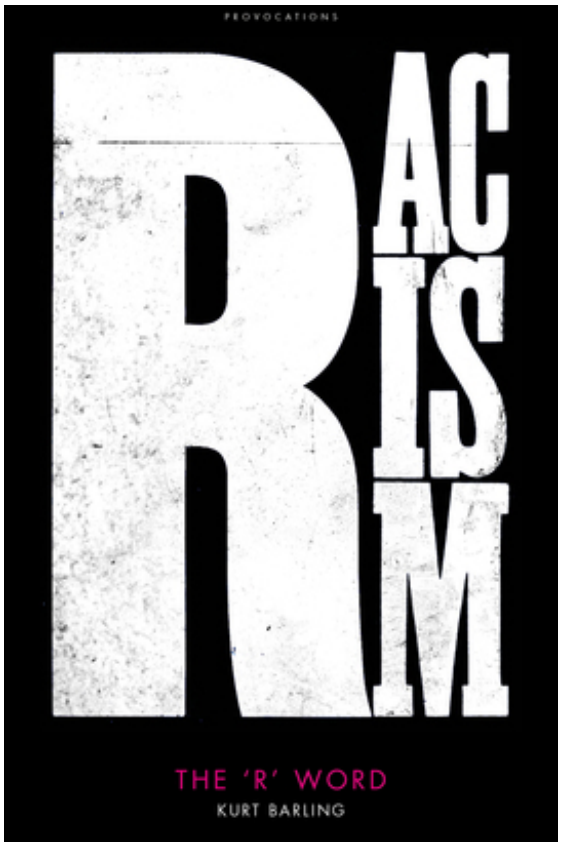
Book Review: The 'R' Word by Kurt Barling

As the newest edition to the **Provocations** *series from Biteback Publishing,* **The 'R' Word** *challenges the idea that we have entered a 'post-racial' society in which race no longer represents a significant obstacle to opportunities. Drawing upon his own personal experiences,* **Kurt Barling** *questions the often paradoxical prevailing discourses surrounding race and racism in contemporary society. Although* **Amal Shahid** *suggests that the resolutely autobiographical nature of the account is occasionally inhibiting, she finds this book a lucid, accessible and effective engagement with issues surrounding racism, written with journalistic flair.*

If you are interested in this book, LSE alumnus Kurt Barling will be speaking at an LSE alumni event, **'The "R" Word: Racism and Modern Society'***, on Tuesday 26 April 2016, alongside Provocations series editor Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, LSE academic Dr Caroline Howarth and LSE's Student Union Anti-Racism Officer, Jasmina Bidé.*

***The 'R' Word*. Kurt Barling. Biteback Publishing. 2015.**



Many believe that the society we live in today is a 'post-racial' one and that race is no longer an impediment to opportunities. And yet, over the course of the year to April 2015, out of all people stopped and searched by the Metropolitan Police in Britain, about 38 per cent were people of 'Black appearance' and approximately 14 per cent were of 'Asian appearance'. Of these, around 21 per cent of the former and 16 per cent of the latter were subsequently arrested. This implies that the rates of stop and search as well as arrests were significantly higher for non-white subjects, even as recently as 2015 (113).

The 'R' Word thus challenges the 'orthodoxies' surrounding racism, arguing for its paradoxical prevalence even today. A Professor of Journalism at Middlesex University, in this book Kurt Barling brings forth the hidden meanings of racism, complemented with well-researched data as well as anecdotes. Drawing upon his personal experience, Barling brings to light the different ways in which racism is ingrained in society, visible even in the most seemingly insignificant gestures by both white people and people of colour. By engaging with issues of racialisation and the debates surrounding interrelations of race and racism, the book is an important contribution to the literature on racism and ethnic relations. It therefore spans a wide array of genres, ranging from sociology and ethnic studies to governance, social policy and journalism. Written in lucid and engaging language, the book makes an interesting read not only for academics, but also for the general public.

Short yet comprehensive, the book generally explores the problems faced by Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people, and how these concerns have changed over the past four decades. The book has a clear structure: the author introduces the patterns of discrimination faced by non-white subjects, largely drawing upon his own experiences. This is followed by three detailed chapters: the first discusses the theoretical meanings surrounding race from early medieval times to the present, while the second looks at the concept of racism and its evolution over time, interspersed with data and narratives drawn mainly from Britain. The final chapter explores possible ways to

tackle the problem of racism today, the last few pages of which conclude the book rather abruptly.

Image Credit: Racism – The Elephant in The Room (John Duffy)

Barling's core argument revolves around the persistence of mental barriers that have coincided with racial bias: these forms of discrimination now encompass altered matrixes arising from a peculiar 'symbiosis' of racist and anti-racist perceptions. This argument is tackled effectively. Using quantitative and qualitative evidence from Britain, Barling shows how there seems to be an improvement in the employment structure of BAME people over time, with an inclusion of young minorities in professional services. But things are not as simple as they appear to be. Evidence suggests that employers avoid hiring BAME graduates, the frustration arising from which may lead to civil unrest and a 'brain drain'. Similar assertions have been made regarding policing, criminal justice, culture and the media.

The author puts forward evidence for the continued existence of racism in Britain, albeit an altered racism – one that may require a new taxonomy. Taking the example of civil disturbances in the late nineteenth century, he demonstrates how the problem of institutional racism was tackled by policy considerations. However, racial classifications for statistical purposes still persist: something that may seem harmless at the outset, but tends to preserve a racist way of thinking, with obvious social consequences in terms of minor everyday actions or, in more extreme cases, social exclusion and segregation.

The major strength of the book lies in the particular issues that it addresses, some of which find parallels in several contemporary societies. For instance, Barling demonstrates how over time there has been a denial of racism in public discourse. The growing multiculturalism of Britain has led people to believe that racism in its rudimentary form no longer exists. On the other hand, a parallel discourse has emerged that argues for a White English victimisation. This sense of majority victimisation has become a part of many diverse societies, ranging from the USA to India.

Barling also successfully explores the other side of the picture: 'Blackness as a Form of Cultural Superiority' (126). This includes a form of racism where certain characteristics are associated with a particular race, which has wrongfully led to a projection of a homogenous minority culture in the media. There is thus now a belief that the only way for a BAME writer to get published is to conform to stereotypes related to their communities, especially those of racism or colonialism (132). This has also resulted in a form of 'racialised biological determinism' (132) among

BAME people themselves:

> *When I made that BBC documentary on the sporting expectations for the Sydney Olympics (The Faster Race, BBC2, 2000), one of the most surprising criticisms of my conclusion that 'race' was a misnomer was the agonised responses from members of the public who were disappointed that I was challenging the idea that black athletes had a natural superiority. It was as if I were removing a badge of superiority which compensated for all the slights that black people have had to endure (127).*

Being of mixed race himself, Barling makes the question of 'who speaks for whom' less controversial. Paradoxically, the reliance on the individual narrative is also the biggest weakness of the book. It brings into play personal experiences much too often; the book at times reads like an autobiography. Thus, while the author acknowledges the strides made in overcoming racism, the evidence presented in favour of the continued prevalence of racism occasionally appears to be subjective. It therefore becomes difficult to assess the extent to which racism is still pertinent.

Moreover, the quantitative evidence he relies on is ironically that which he is critical of: namely, the 2011 Census Data from the Office of National Statistics. Without inclusion of appropriate tables representing the data used, it is difficult to fully assess the interpretations made by the author. Furthermore, some facts and claims remain uncorroborated with sources, with the author instead drawing on memory and experience.

The controversial issue of racism has been engaged with effectively by Barling, who highlights hitherto unthought paradigms and gives due weight to different perspectives. His journalistic flair makes the book a worthwhile read for all types of audiences. Though subjective at times, the narrative is concise and serves as a good introduction to concerns surrounding racism.

Amal Shahid is pursuing her Masters degree in Economic History (Research) at the LSE. She has an undergraduate degree in History from Sri Venkateswara College, University of Delhi. Currently, she is researching migration and labour history in colonial and post-colonial India.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.